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ABSTRACT

A paper describes a project in which a writing center created a Web site using digital video (DV) along with essay texts, scenario notes, and a Web-based response exercise, in order to better prepare writing tutor apprentices for a range of ethical and pedagogical dilemmas which might occur. The paper begins by discussing reasons for the project and the process for making the videos. It then discusses the five scenarios filmed: (1) The Angry Writer; (2) The Fix-It Shop; (3) The Reluctant Revisor; (4) The Grammar Tutorial; and (5) The Nontraditional Student. The paper continues by discussing technological aspects of the project. It concludes with descriptions of additional scenarios filmed later, including: an ESL student, a friend who wants tutoring, a writer with an offensive paper, and a writer who is a student athlete. (Contains 10 references.) (EF)

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It's a Wrap: Digital Video and Tutor Training

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Paper presented at the 5th National Writing Centers Association Conference, Baltimore, MD, November 2-4, 2000.

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All tutors, no matter their level of experience, run into difficult moments with writers. Certainly, we have all met writers who are:

- angry at their professors
- expecting only grammatical assistance
- reluctant to make any changes
- older than the tutor and not certain of the tutor's expertise
- hoping for a "fix" from a tutor who will do the writer's work.

Skilled tutors can, of course, adapt to most situations and respond ethically to these and other typical "trouble spots." The situation is very different for novice tutors. The problems outlined above, while common enough, may not crop up during a novice's apprenticeship. At our university we training tutors during a semester in which a new tutor might observe a half a dozen tutorials and conduct, under varying levels of supervision, a dozen more. Every year in our program, a few trainees come to me worried about the outcome of a tutorial. Some ethical line may have been crossed, a writer may have left the conference angry or confused, or the professor may have contacted the writing center with a complaint.

While we have gradually improved the content of our training course, including more "faux" papers, guided apprenticeships with a faculty member and her class, and exercises such a mock tutorials, students and faculty alike hoped we could better prepare apprentices for a range of ethical and pedagogical dilemmas that can occur.

For this reason, we began to consider adding video tutorials to our library of materials. Traditional videotape appealed to us early on, but it lacks the interactive nature of our other training materials and in-class exercises. A linear videotape may

work very well to introduce and demystify a writing center's services, as Sara Sobota has done at Coastal Carolina University, but the audience for our project is the novice tutor, not the new visitor to the center. Since our staff has access to some high-end video editing equipment and a staff well versed in Web design, we decided to try an experiment with digital video (or DV), a Web site with multiple video clips for different approaches to "tough tutorials." We quickly realized that the Web site could also include the texts of essays used in the tutorials, scenario notes, and a Web-based response exercise. After obtaining a university grant to purchase a computer for editing and higher-end Web design, and with a borrowed DV camera in hand, students in the training class designed the five scenarios above and we began filming.

A Hidden Agenda?

Our pedagogy for the project was straightforward, even as we pursued a slightly subversive administrative agenda. First, we never intended to replace our face-to-face training in the Writing Center. As the class members discussed the project, we all felt that tutors-in-training should experience common frustrations and develop workable solutions for situations they might not encounter in their observations and apprentice tutorials. Following the advice given in Steve Sherwood's "Apprenticed to Failure," we decided to film some poor approaches to tutorials and ask apprentices to reflect on why these and other methods backfire. Including failures has worked well for others working with video; Sobota's informational videos for freshman writers include humorous moments when tutors provide bad advice or insult writers in a manner "exaggerated to highlight the absurdity of the actors' assumptions" (13). We also included several "over-the-top"

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failures, when writers rushing angrily out of the center and slamming the door behind them.

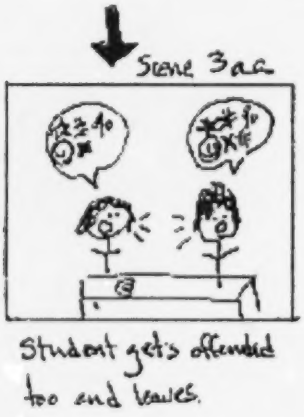
A second reason for the project was to train a staff that is widely dispersed and often not in touch with "home base" for weeks at a time. While the writing center has a regular staff of tutors, our WAC program uses "Writing Fellows," trained alongside the peer tutors, who work across campus after being assigned to classes. Preparing them for such independent work means giving them the most flexible training possible. We also have a goal of providing follow-up training for existing tutors and Fellows. With over 40 tutors and Writing Fellows working in a given semester, we find that "just in time" refresher training (timely e-mail, new Web resources, a printed newsletter) works better than mandatory staff meetings and seminars. We have found that even when we pay and feed undergraduates who attend meetings, we are fortunate to get a 50% turnout.

We also wanted to impress our colleagues and superiors even as we alter their perceptions of how best to include and assess writing in their courses. Our Writing Center and WAC program are "sharers" rather than "seclusionists," in Jane Cogie's terms. In detailed reports to professors, we emphasize the collaborative nature of the peer tutorial. Through the Web and other methods of publication, WAC and the Writing Center make faculty aware that *their* peers consider work with a tutor a sign of motivation, not of laziness or lack of ability. We are also proud to be perceived as using "cutting edge" technology for training tutors, even as we maintain a face-to-face tutoring operation (we do not yet have an OWL). On our campus as on most others, departments and programs increasingly compete for funding, space, and grants. We gain the respect of colleagues, alumni, and administrators by using technology for clearly defined pedagogical goals,

rather than for its own sake. We include students as collaborators, not passive subjects; increasing "active learning" is a goal of the university's strategic plan, we often note in funding requests.

The Process of Making the Videos

A The class filmed these five scenarios (angry writer, grammar-based tutorial, nontraditional student, fix-it shop, and reluctant revisor) in Fall, 1999 and a few students helped to edit tape, digitize video, assist with the interface design, and produce some Web pages between January and August of 2000. After the student teams had selected the five scenarios, they divided the tasks for the filming. Two students worked as actors, another provided the paper (complete with errors appropriate for the scenario) that became the basis for the tutorial.



Two other students wrote scripts and a variety of story-boards consisting of individual cells representing scenes to be filmed. The cells shown in the text come from the "grammar tutorial" and the "angry writer".

Each story-board not only charted the course of the tutorial but also indicated every point where a tutor could try a different method, and the

designers sketched out the consequence in each case. We then shot film for each cell on the story-boards.

For the day of filming, we has asked the actors to study--but not memorize--the dialogue in the scripts. The student and faculty "crew" asked the students to improvise dialogue for each scene sketched out in the storyboard, paying careful attention to any "rich bits" of dialogue from the scripts and using only those words verbatim. We had not expected such good acting from the students. Their success probably came from their experience as writers and tutors. By the day of filming, everyone in the training class had worked as an apprentice tutor for nearly a semester. This on-the-job experience let the tutors simulate the give-and-take of a difficult tutorial very effectively.

Several "takes" were done for certain scenes. In the weeks following the filming, a Writing Fellow reviewed all the tape and noted which takes worked best, which had good moments, and which went in *Media 100*'s "blooper bin." We then began to process of digitizing the film and making the *Quicktime* movies now available. At the same time, we worked out the fine points of the Web design, finally settling on the graphics and menus now used. We tested a mock-up of the site with as many versions of *Netscape* and *Explorer* as we could, both on PCs and Macs.

The Five Scenarios

The Angry Writer

Laura, a freshman in a rigorous humanities course, hates the class, does not want to write a paper, thinks her professor gives vague assignments, yet has never had

much trouble with writing before. Ann has to control her own emotional responses and somehow get Laura to care about her paper and about working with a peer tutor. We included several patently bad reactions by Ann, including getting mad at Laura (with Laura storming out), patronizing Laura too much, and critiquing the professor unethically. More effective approaches from Ann include acknowledging Laura's anger and focusing on the paper and noting in an ethical manner that Ann, too, has had trouble in some very challenging classes.

The Fix-it Shop

Luke is in a terrible fix: Siobhan wants him to write her paper. Luke tries a variety of heuristics and questions. Some of them backfire, others work well. We probably filmed more approaches for this scenario than for any of the others; the actors had been in the same situation, especially with friends who came to them for help. The actors wanted to simulate the ways in which a tutor can get a writer to do her own work through the use of techniques such as glossing and nutshelling ideas, through asking a range of specific and general questions, and through the tutor using Rogerian techniques of repeating key words to the writer and then asking for more detail about these "code words" not fully explained in the essay (Flower 90-95). Bad techniques were easy to film: Luke did everything from breaking our university's honor code by writing the paper for Siobhan to overreacting to Siobhan's request for unethical help, enraging her by repeating, in a condescending way, our policy on plagiarism.

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The Reluctant Revisor

Lisa has always been rewarded for her work, but suddenly she has been sent to the Writing Center. Emma sees some areas for improvement in Lisa's essay, but Lisa wants to cling to every word. Emma tries a number of techniques to acknowledge the strengths in the draft while showing Lisa that some areas remain unclear to her. Depending on Emma's approach, Lisa either leaves overwhelmed and unsure about her writing ability or goes away from the tutorial confident, feeling that she has written a solid paper that requires some thoughtful reworking.

The Grammar Tutorial

A professor wants Bryan to get help with almost every grammatical rule. As Bryan rattles off the list of sins from the professor's referral form, Daisy sees other patterns of error in the essay. Daisy tries the effective approaches of working first with the most pressing rhetorical problems in the paper, then assisting Bryan with the most serious and repeated sentence-level errors. On the other hand, in other scenes Daisy also offends Bryan by insisting that his word processor has a grammar check and such work is beneath her. She fails to use our online writing handbook well in one scene, then in another scene uses it well to reinforce a point and to give Bryan "something to take home".

The Nontraditional Student

Susan has a busy life: children, job, volunteer work, *and* classes. Her work for the class has become overwhelming. Hannah has a tough job, since she does not have a lot of experience with older students. Hannah tries too hard to treat Susan like a peer, and this approach backfires. In other scenes, Hannah approaches Susan professionally and works on specific aspects of the paper. Some approaches overwhelm Susan, requiring Hannah to modify her techniques. In others Hannah simply fails to comprehend the special challenges and opportunities for learning that such a conference provides.

Technological Aspects of the Project:

We put this aspect of the project last, since we believe that pedagogy should drive technological choices. After deciding our purposes for the scenarios and the ways in which readers would interact with the materials, we turned to Web design.

We wanted a completely Web-based project using off-the-shelf, free technologies that could work on any modern PC or Mac browser (such as *Quicktime* and standard HTML tags). Our primary audience on campus has a lot of "bandwidth" available (T1 or T3 connections in all buildings and dorms) and most students now have computers in their rooms. For this primary audience we developed a "high bandwidth" version of the

project, in which each video scene ranges between 5 and 40 megabytes. For off-campus audiences with slower network connections we began work on a "low bandwidth" version with video scenes compressed to about 1/5 the size of the on-campus videos.

We discovered that even the "low bandwidth" version does not work well over a modem. This occurs since our campus Web server does not fully support streaming video at high speeds. Even when the Writing Center bringing its own streaming video server online next year, something that will better support those with modem access, we will provide CD-ROM versions of the low-bandwidth version, at our cost plus a few dollars, to those requesting them.

We have been asked by several people at conferences or on campus, impressed by the quality of the video scenes, whether we would soon "take the project commercial." We answer with a resounding "NO" every time. In the cyberpunk spirit that "information wants to be free," we will continue to take advantage of our campus' ample resources and share our intellectual property. Granted, a commercialized project under the aegis of a large academic publishing house might gain a more professional level of design and a wider audience. The cost would be direct, however; we anticipated a *free* product that writing center professionals and tutors could employ in their training. Frankly, we fear that a commercial publisher might simply price a enhanced version of our project beyond the reach of centers without the budget to purchase it. On the other hand, the free or low-cost Web and CD versions produced by us fit the collaborative model of writing center work and the free exchange of ideas and best practices among teacher-scholars like ourselves.

Other Design Notes

Those contemplating a similar project should be forewarned that a heavy investment of time is needed. The filming itself was a joy: we completed all five scenarios in eight hours of filming one weekend. We even had a caterer provide food and had members of the groups help on "the set" with adding scenes, critiquing the story-board, and setting up camera angles and lighting. Then the time-consuming part began. Although *Media 100* and the related video equipment we used are not terribly difficult to master, we spent over 100 hours from January to July 2000 marking tape, coding the Web pages, digitizing scenes, assembling the edited clips, and compressing the video master copies with the *Media Cleaner Pro* software. Without the help of two Writing Fellows assigned to help, the project would have been nearly impossible to complete in two semesters.

For the "broadband" version of the videos, we set the frame rate for the compression at 30 and the audio at 44.1 Khz. These settings provided good results, conveying the body language and nuances of speech used in the scenarios. The videos became much larger than we planned, of course; we had the naive idea that the entire project would fit on a single CD-ROM, when barely 10% of the broadband version would fit. When preparing the "lowband" copies of the videos, we reset compression to 8 frames per second, keyframes at one frame in four, and audio to 11 Khz. We have burned a few copies of the "lowband" version, and it neatly fits onto a CD-ROM. As the

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project expands to 11 scenarios next year, we anticipate providing a dual-platform CD with compressed versions of the files.

We chose Apple's *Quicktime* for delivering the video. We had also considered *Realplayer*, but we found that *Quicktime* offers a less-restrictive licensing for streaming the video over our campus network. Given our desire to make these materials widely available on campus and free or at very low cost to others, we decided to try *Quicktime* as a good cross-platform solution.

What We Could Not Do

Our intention had been to capture many different approaches to a difficult moment in a tutorial. We found, however, that our story-boards did not provide enough alternative solutions for difficult spots. Thus, while filming, we asked the actors to brainstorm, and they quickly devised other scenes that we then shot. This added some depth, but we still did not achieve the "choose your own adventure" multiplicity of outcomes we had originally imagined.

We also could not capture every possible outcome in a given situation. Following our own best instincts as peer tutors, we decided that we would present common outcomes for given tutorial strategies.

Next Steps

In the Fall, 2000, training course, apprentice tutors designed and filmed six additional scenarios for:

- An ESL student (not all ESL students, but a Japanese writer new to the thesis-support pattern of American academic prose)
- A demoralized writer who believes that her work is awful
- A friend who wants tutoring (shot "on location" in a noisy, cluttered dorm room)
- A writer with an offensive paper
- A student athlete who first gets stereotyped as a "dumb jock" by an insensitive tutor, then patronized by an adoring fan
- A writer with a strong paper.

The ESL tutorial presents special challenges. A Japanese student volunteered to act in the scenario, and she is very sensitive to the needs for our second-language population on campus. We want to avoid cultural stereotypes (lumping together all "Asian" writers) while showing tutors how different educational backgrounds influence writers' ideas in areas such as the structure of papers, the use of digressions, and the citation of sources.

As a longer-term goal, we would like to extend our services as video editors to our first-year composition program. We hope to develop a set of online exercises to help peer-critique groups work together more effectively. This project might include multiple drafts of essays, videos of group interaction, and write-to-learn exercises for students.

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